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February 12, 2022

Appropriations Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2700
Hartford, Connecticut 06106
APPTestimony@cga.ct.gov

Re: Appropriations Hearing Testimony on HB 5037 (AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023) regarding the Governor's Proposed DOH Adjustments to the FY23 Budget

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Dathan, Representative Nolan, Senator Miner, Representative France, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for receiving and considering this testimony on House Bill 5037 (AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023). I wish to emphasize these important investments through the Department of Housing to support our efforts to **end homelessness in Connecticut**. My name is Steve Werlin, and I work and reside in New Haven, Connecticut.

As the Executive Director of **Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, Inc.**, a community-based homelessness services and frontline hunger relief organization, I am an active member of the statewide Reaching Home Campaign to prevent and end homelessness in our state.

Our organization primarily serves people experiencing *unsheltered* homelessness; although it is our charge to respond as a first-contact to people on the street, many of those we serve are actively struggling to access permanent housing, as well as a wide range of support services. As a housing first agency, we, alongside our dozens of partners across Connecticut, emphasize **safe, affordable, and permanent housing** as the primary solution to and most effective strategy in ending homelessness. When our state's residents have stable housing with appropriate supports, their **economic and health outcomes improve**. The COVID-19 health crisis has worsened an already dire situation, emphasizing the increased need for permanent housing for *all* of Connecticut's residents.

I respectfully request that the Committee support the following proposals and expansions from the Governor's budget for the Department of Housing (DOH):

1. I support the preservation of the following DOH FY23 allocations:
 - \$2.935 million Homeless Youth line
 - \$85.323 million Housing/Homeless Services line
 - \$637K Municipal Housing/Homeless Services line
 - \$100 million bond authorization for the Affordable Housing FLEX Fund and \$50 million bond authorization for the state Housing Trust Fund
2. **CAN's & 2-1-1:** I support an additional \$2.3 million in the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line to provide critical staff infrastructure support to **Coordinated Access Networks (CAN's) and 2-1-1**. CAN's provide streamlined access to the homeless services system at the regional level. 2-1-1 serves as the statewide single point of entry to CAN's. As an organization that offers first-contact services, our frontline staff at DESK know that a **properly-funded and well-functioning CAN** offers the critical prospect of not having to spend even one more night on the street. Conversely, an underfunded and poorly-functioning CAN undoubtedly results in widespread, long-term homelessness. CAN's are both the lifeline for immediate response and the integral structure for getting people housed. *To properly fund our CAN's is to invest in a system that works.*
3. **RAP:** I support an increase to the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line by at least \$20 million in FY23 to expand the **Rental Assistance Program (RAP)**, including \$2 million to provide rental assistance to 200 scattered-site supportive housing units for highly vulnerable individuals and families. *Ending homelessness means housing people.* The Rental Assistance Program ensures that we, as a state, are doing just that.
4. **Eviction Prevention:** I support an additional \$2.5 million in DOH's Housing/Homeless Services line to establish and implement a [proven eviction prevention model](#) that couples high-quality social work with legal services to arrive at a **stable housing resolution** that benefits *both* tenants and landlords. Preventing eviction should mean avoiding homelessness for the tenant and stabilizing costly housing transitions for the landlord.
5. **Restoring Community Services:** I support the Connecticut Community Nonprofit Alliance's long-term plan to restore at least \$461 million to community nonprofits, which includes housing and homeless service organizations. These organizations are the lifeblood of direct services on the ground in our communities.
6. **Funding the Frontline:** I support providing an additional \$13.34 million in FY23 (\$8.08 million at DOH and \$5.26 million at DMHAS) to provide homelessness and housing service organizations funding for **adequate wages, benefits, and professional development** for frontline workers. Specifically, I support the following line increases:

- \$7.47 million increase in DOH Housing/Homeless Services line
- \$169K increase in DOH Municipal Housing/Homeless Services line
- \$436K increase in DOH Homeless Youth line

We are “human services” organizations: people do the work. When the pandemic hit Connecticut in March 2020, our frontline staff didn’t pack it up and go home: they were on the streets, in the shelters, in the hotels, in supportive housing apartments *doing the work*. They deserve to be compensated fairly, with *at least* a living wage. Working with people experiencing homelessness exposes our staff to secondhand trauma; as a result, we see staff-turnover caused by exhaustion and burnout. When opportunities to seek employment in other fields arise, frontline staff are easily courted away by fairer compensation. “Funding the frontline” really means *maintaining* the frontline so that we can continue to provide consistent, quality care for the most vulnerable segment of our population.

Finally, I support the governor’s proposed allocation of \$50 million in **American Rescue Plan** recovery funds to support the creation of 350 additional housing units affordable to households with incomes between 30% and 50% of area median income. This one’s a no-brainer; the allocation of ARP funds will provide critical support to do precisely what the congressional act intended: *rescue people*.

Homelessness is solvable. Connecticut can make homelessness a rare, brief, and nonrecurring by investing in what works: housing, support services, and the people and infrastructure that support our most vulnerable residents. The allocation of the funds as outlined above will make my community in New Haven, as well as all communities across Connecticut, a better place to live *for everyone*. When we raise up those experiencing homelessness, we all rise. *When we solve homelessness, everyone wins.*

Thank you to the Committee for this opportunity to offer my testimony, and more importantly for your hard work in weighing these important and lifesaving decisions for our state. As we look ahead to a more stable and prosperous future for Connecticut, **I am indebted to you for your service** in helping to shape a community in which *everyone* prospers and *everyone* is housed.

Sincerely,



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